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PRESENTATION
OF THE
GOLD MEDALS

AWARDED TO DR. JOHN RAE, OF THE HUDSON'S BAY
COMPANY, AND CAPTAIN HENRY STRACHEY, OF THE
HONOURABLE EAST INDIA COMPANY'S ENGINEERS.

THE Founder's Gold Medal has been awarded by the Council to Dr. John Rae "for his survey of Boothia under most severe privations in 1848, and for his recent explorations on foot, and in boats, of the coasts of Wollaston and Victoria Lands, by which very important additions have been made to the geography of the Arctic regions."

Dr. Rae's survey of the inlet of Boothia in 1848 was unique in its kind. With a boldness never surpassed, he determined on wintering on the proverbially desolate shores of Repulse Bay, where, or in the immediate neighbourhood, one expedition of two ships had previously wholly perished, and two others were all but lost. There he maintained his party on deer shot principally by himself, and spent ten months of an Arctic winter in a hut of stones, the locality not even yielding drift timber. With no other fuel than a kind of hay made of the *Andromeda tetragona*, he preserved his men in health, and thus enabled them to execute their arduous surveying journeys of upwards of 1000 miles round Committee Bay (the southern portion of Boothia Gulf) in the spring. Next season he brought his party back to the Hudson Bay posts in better working condition than when he set out, and with but a small diminution of the few bags of provisions he had taken with him.

In his last journeys, in which he travelled more than 3000 miles in snow-shoes, Dr. Rae has shown equal judgment and perseverance. Dreading, from his former experience, that the sea might be frozen, he determined on a spring journey over the ice, and performed a most extraordinary one. His last starting-place at Fort Confidence, on the Great Bear Lake, being at the distance of more than 150 miles from the coast by the route he was compelled to take, he could not, as in the parties of our naval expeditions, travel on the ice with capacious sledges, and was therefore obliged to restrict his provisions and baggage to the smallest possible weight. With a pound of fat daily for fuel, and without the possibility of carrying a tent, he set out accompanied by two men only, and, trusting solely for shelter to snow-houses, which

he taught his men to build, accomplished a distance of 1060 miles in 39 days, or 27 miles per day including stoppages—a feat which has never been equalled in Arctic travelling; and this without the aid of advanced depôts, and dragging a sledge himself great part of the way.

The spring journey, and that which followed in the summer in boats, during which 1700 miles were traversed in 80 days, have proved the continuity of Wollaston and Victoria Lands along a distance of nearly 1100 miles, and have shown that they are separated by a strait from N. Somerset and Boothia, through which the flood-tide sets from the north. In this way Dr. Rae has performed most essential service, even in reference to the search after Franklin, by limiting the channels of outlet between the continent of America and the Arctic Islands, as now laid down in a new map by Mr. Arrowsmith.

The President, having read the above notice, then addressed Sir George Back in these words :—

“Sir George, I rejoice that Arctic explorers of such high reputation as yourself and Sir John Richardson, and so sound a geographer as Mr. Arrowsmith, should have successfully urged the merits of Dr. Rae, and have satisfactorily established his claims to our highest reward. To you, with whom I have lived on terms of friendship since the period of Franklin’s first expedition, I have peculiar satisfaction in handing this medal, and in requesting you to convey it to the bold and judicious traveller* who has won it, with the assurance of the deep sense I entertain of the value of his services.”

Sir George Back replied—

“In the absence of Dr. Rae, I cannot but feel great pleasure in being made the recipient of this proof of the value set on his services by the Royal Geographical Society.

“We, in fact, but honour ourselves in thus distinguishing with the high token of our esteem and admiration the honest and unassuming traveller who, in his severest trials, evinced a judgment always equal to the occasion.

“Sir, in my opinion, every word of his narrative is stamped with truth. If time permitted, I could relate more than one anecdote showing the hardy indifference with which he regarded what, among *voyageurs*, are termed personal comforts. In his last Boat Expedition he had not even the Arctic luxury of a cup of tea, but was well content to share the chance luck of the kettle with his crew.

“His greatest suffering, he once remarked (little thinking it would be repeated), arose from being obliged to sleep upon his frozen moccasins in order to thaw them for the morning’s use.

“He will appreciate and honour this Medal, as well as the courteous manner in which you, Sir, have bestowed it: nor will Sir J. Pelly and the Hudson’s Bay Company be less gratified at the distinction. In Dr. Rae’s name I beg to return you infinite thanks.”

The Victoria or Patron’s Gold Medal is awarded to Captain Henry Strachey, of the Hon. East India Company’s service, “For his extensive

* Dr. Rae was absent on a visit to his family at Stromness in Orkney.

explorations and surveys in Western Tibet, as laid down in maps which have been submitted to the Council, and are now laid before the Society.”

Captain Henry Strachey's first expedition into Tibet was made, in the summer of the year 1846, over the passes of Western Kumaon. He then penetrated to within a few miles of the river Sutlej, returning by a more easterly route. On this occasion, besides obtaining some acquaintance with those mountain-passes, with which he has since become so familiar, and the elevation of which ranges from 17,000 to 19,000 feet or more, he was enabled for the first time clearly to point out the remarkable circumstance that the water-shed of the chief rivers of this portion of the Himalaya is to the N. of the line of greatest elevation—a phenomenon which seems to hold good in all parts of the chain.

In the autumn of the same year he again entered Tibet, by a pass still more to the E. than those he had before crossed, with the intention of exploring the lakes Rákas-tál and Mánasarowar, which had not been visited by any European since the time of Moorcroft and his companions, 34 years before. In this he was most successful, having gone round the northern end of Rákas-tál, returning between the two lakes along the edge of Mánasarowar, and finally re-entering the British territory at the extreme N.W. point of the frontier of the kingdom of Nepaul. The geographical results of these two journeys were embodied in a map drawn up by him on his return; and a detailed account of his latter expedition has been published in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Calcutta*. The arrangement of the drainage of this remarkable region was now for the first time correctly made out, and the elevation of the lakes satisfactorily determined. Besides this, much curious information as to the government of this part of Tibet was procured, which his later investigations have shown to be substantially correct.

These two expeditions were undertaken altogether at Captain Strachey's own risk and expense, and were accomplished through the personal energies which he displayed in overcoming the opposition of the frontier Tibetan authorities. In the following year, however, the Indian Government having determined to send a commission to determine the boundaries of the territories of Raja Goolab Sing, Captain Strachey was one of the officers selected for the duty, and on him devolved the geographical work of the mission. He left Simla in the autumn of 1847, and, having passed the two succeeding winters at Lé, the capital of Ladák, he returned to the British provinces in the autumn of 1849. With the exception of the winter months, in which travelling is impossible in that elevated region, Captain Strachey was constantly employed during these two years in prosecuting his explorations in various parts of the country, the results of which are embodied in his map; this will sufficiently show the careful manner in which his examination was made.

The map represents a region of about 500 miles in length, by 150 miles in breadth, of which Captain Strachey has himself traversed a length of more than 400 miles. Of this again 200 miles being under

Chinese dominion, it is consequently most jealously guarded to prevent the entrance of any foreigners; and it is therefore most creditable to our Medallist that he has been thus successful in prosecuting his explorations in a manner in which no former traveller in those regions was ever enabled to do. The topographical details of this map are given with minuteness, and the elevations of the places have been noted with great care. Much attention has also been paid to the orthography, a matter of no less importance than difficulty—and one deserving of more attention from travellers than it usually receives.

Besides the accurate detail of the courses of the main branches of the Indus and Ganges which are presented in this map, Capt. Strachey has for the first time imparted to the physical geographer the important fact, chiefly derived from a journey of Dr. Thomson, to which allusion will afterwards be made, of the unity of the great mountain mass that stretches along the northern boundary of Hindostan. To use the words of his brother and associate in the preceding number of our Journal, he has shown “that neither the Kouenlun nor the Himálaya, as marked upon our maps, have any definite special existence as mountain chains, apart from the general elevated mass of Tibet. That rugged country thus seems to form the summit of a great protuberance above the general level of the earth’s surface, of which these two chains form the north and south faces.”*

In addition to these purely geographical data, Captain Strachey has collected a mass of information relating to the climate and statistics in general, and has embodied the whole in an elaborate Report to the Government of India, which elucidates the physical characters of this very remarkable region, as well as the condition of its inhabitants. An abstract of this Report will shortly be presented to the Society, accompanied by an outline map reduced from the large surveys which have been exhibited.

In concluding this notice of Captain Strachey’s researches, I cannot but call your attention to the hardships inseparable from the life of a traveller in such a country as Tibet, where mountains of the most rugged and inaccessible character, rising at almost every point into the region of perpetual snow, present difficulties inferior only to those encountered by the Arctic voyager.

The President then delivered the Patron’s Medal to Captain Richard Strachey, and said—

“Captain Richard Strachey, In the absence of your brother, I have true gratification in placing in your hands the gold medal bearing the effigy of our gracious Queen, and granted for researches in the Himalaya mountains, in which, as our volumes testify, you have also taken a distinguished part. I beg you to assure him that his services have not only obtained the approbation of the Council of this Society, but also that of the most competent of all juries, his contemporaries and brother-travellers in other parts of the Himalaya; and I feel confident that this award will be highly approved by the illustrious Humboldt himself, whose greatest ambition, during the last half of

* Journal of the Royal Geographical Society, vol. xxi. p. 58.

his life, has been to traverse these mountains, the mightiest on the face of the globe.”

To this Captain Strachey replied as follows—

“ Mr. President, I shall have great pleasure in communicating to my brother the honour that has been conferred upon him by our Council in selecting him to receive one of the Society’s Medals, an honour which he had not at all expected, and which I am sure he will appreciate very highly. Under no circumstances would it become me to attempt a panegyric of my brother, of whose merits I may hardly be supposed to be a very impartial judge, and I am therefore happy to find that I am altogether relieved from any such task by the very kind manner in which you have expressed your sense of his services in the cause of geographical science. I may, however, express my satisfaction at the recognition that has just been made, by those best qualified to judge on such matters, of the importance of the explorations that have recently been made in all parts of the Himalaya, which will most certainly be found to have very greatly increased our knowledge of this remarkable chain of mountains, when they are fully laid before the public.

“ Allow me, Mr. President, again to thank you on behalf of my brother.”

Note by the President.—Since the Anniversary Meeting of the Royal Geographical Society, the Hudson’s Bay Company have, to their great honour, determined, on the suggestion of Dr. Rae, to send another expedition, under the command of our Medallist, to complete the survey of the coast of Arctic America, a small portion only of which, along the west shores of Boothia, still remains unexplored. The party will quit York Factory about the middle of June 1853, and, proceeding by the coast to Chesterfield Inlet, will leave the larger of two boats there, and, crossing to Back’s River, will descend it to the sea and thence advance northwards as far as may be desired. If the weather should prove favourable, this exploration may be accomplished in one summer; but if not, Dr. Rae is quite prepared to pass another winter in those desolate regions, and we may hope more comfortably than during his former residence in Repulse Bay.